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ABSTRACT

In this paper, it is argued that fragmentation inevitably occurs in a discipline whenever that discipline loses its distinctive center, and that the proper center for any program of literary study is an abiding concern with demonstrating and teaching the function of the symbolic imagination. The author suggests that any department of literature that fails to center its program on the teaching of literature as a special mode of knowledge quite distinct from the modes employed by the social and political sciences forfeits its right to be called a department of literature. Literature can be approached in the following three general ways: reading for pleasure, reading for substantial knowledge, and reading to understand the function of the symbolic imagination. Only the third way will keep the study of literature alive. (TS)

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THE DANGERS OF FRAGMENTATION

The two terms under consideration in the panel discussion this year, diversification and fragmentation, are often used to designate a single phenomenon. We call that phenomenon diversification whenever our declared intention has been to accomodate the ubiquitous and interest democratic pressure for pluralism in all our institutional strategies; fragmentation whenver we see that such accommodation really derives from our failure to formulate fundamental aims and objectives for our activities as professionals or even as human beings. No matter which term we use, however, the phenomenon is always liable to description by the other--suggesting that what we often talk about in such discussions as these is our own prejudices. Thus I should preface what I have to say with a statement of my prejudices, in so far as they may be relevant, so that readers can make allowances for them as their own prejudices require.

Let me begin with a generalization. I take it as axiomatic that most of us recognize three ways of looking at literature. The first, which we may call hedonistic, or ludic if our mood is for fancier terms, is the one we resort to whenever we indulge in reading for diversion. We relax and settle down to our pleasure, enjoying the literature before us as titillation, intellectual or otherwise, and make no demands upon it except that it amuse us. The second way is called didactic because on assuming it we expect our literature to provide us with substantial knowledge, about morals perhaps or about philosophy, politics, theology, history, or some other matter. If we com-

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bine this way with the first, of course, we have the familiar sugar-coated pill theory of literature, which from Horace's time to the present has characterized most operational justifications for literary study. It appeases the majority of our students, who require either entertainment or relevance, it satisfied those who authorize budgets for English departments, and it may sooth our consciences during some of those long, wakeful nights when we question our purpose in life or seek to justify our professional existence.

There is, however, a third way of regarding literature, and that third way is the only one that can put our professional consciences into a permanent state of good health. We cannot, I admit, derive an abiding respect for ourselves as professionals from purveying entertainment either to college students or to the masses; and if it is substance alone that we sell, we had better let others do the marketing for us; for literature, like Bacon, takes all substance for its province and has no special substance of its own, with the possible exception of literary history. The unique thing that literature has to offer is a special way of knowing that makes it an indispensible part of human education. Unlike the natural and social sciences, which observe, analyze, and interpret experience, poetry comprehends experience by recreating it. For a long time poetry was our principle mode of knowledge, and it brought the human race to a high degree of sophistication during those centuries when an infant science had developed no distinctive modes of its own. In recent years, however, science with its well-developed empirical mode of acquiring knowledge has made special and

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increasingly rapid advances into the thickets of ignorance that surround us, and it undobtedly will make more of theses in the years to come. For this we can only be grateful. Nevertheless, we need to keep in mind that the ancient and now sometimes discredited poetic imagination is the springboard from which all genuinely new assaults on our encompassing ignorance must begin. Coleridge called it "the living power and prime agent of all human perception...a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM"; but regardless of what we call it, the old-fashioned method of satisfying our zeal for knowledge by making meaningful shapes and actions out of our experience is still viable and still necessary to a civilized humanity, and we as professors of literature are among its guardians. The poetic method is, in fact, the principal thing we have to guard--perhaps, in the last analysis, the only thing. For if we make the mistake of trying to teach poems without teaching poetry, we shall probably end up teaching nothing that cannot be taught better by someone else. Without the method of poetry at our side we have only sterilized masterpieces to offer our constituents, persuasively packaged pieces of substance that have long since ceased to grow. At best we shall be teaching literary history, but we shall certainly not be teaching living literature. With poetry itself as our compass and guide we may reveal in the same works masterpieces that are still meaningful, still capable of generating new insights, and even more powerful to shape and direct experience than when they were first let loose by their creators. Thus at the risk of appearing dogmatic, I

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suggest that any department of literature that fails to center its program on the teaching of literature as a special mode of knowledge quite distinct from the modes employed by the social and political sciences forfeits its right to be called a department of literature. Sooner or later it must decline and die, and the prelude to its demise will be fragmentation, which the fragmenters themselves may well attempt to defend as diversification. The danger, I submit, is not in the fragmentation itself, but in the disappearance of the center, of of which disappearance fragmentation is only a symptom.

To be sure, some of the courses we teach do not absolutely require such a center. This is true, for example, of all our courses in language and linguistics. These fascinating studies are useful adjuncts to the study of literature, and people with literary interests have traditionally been expected to supervise them; yet in method and objective they belong with the sciences, and they flourish only when the guardians assigned to them are willing, at least temporarily, to play the role of scientists. Rhetoric is another such study; for valuable as rhetoric can be in providing a knowledge of some of the devices that literature uses in its operation as a mode of knowledge, it is essentially a collection of strategies whereby the user seeks not to know but to communicate or to persuade. The study of rhetoric is thus only ancillary to the study of literature. It can on occasion serve its mistress well, but it does not sit comfortably or appropriately at the same table. Still another handmaiden is the study of bibliography, a child of the sciences enlisted by literary studies to iden-

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tify the authoritative mechanical artifacts, books and manuscripts, by which our literary documents should be preserved. We owe much to all these studies and should by all means cherish them, but we must recognize that they are not and never can be anything but peripheral to our real interest.

This brings me to the crux of my paper, which consists of the following points. First, fragmentation is what inevitably occurs in a discipline whenever that discipline loses its distinctive center; and the loss of the center, I should repeat, is the disease that concerns us here, not fragmentation, which is only a symptom. Second, the proper center for any program of literary study is an abiding concern to demonstrate and teach the function of the symbolic imagination. No other center will serve. If we make the mistake of building our program around literary history, or the history of ideas, or our Anglo-American cultural heritage, or the dignity of man, or anything other than the essence of poetry itself, we run the risk of metamorphosing our program into something other than a program of literary study. Except in rare cases when the metamorphosis is successful and the program does indeed become a program of history of philosophy or something other than a program of literature, the inevitable course of fragmentation can be relatively slow; but slow or fast, symptom or disease, any unplanned and uncontrolled fragmentation, if unchecked, must eventually prove fatal.

Let me, for the sake of argument, consider what might very well happen in a department of English planned and administered as a depart-

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ment of literary history. The possibilities fall somewhere between two extremes, one of which is unlikely and the other, likely to very likely. At the unlikely extreme our hypothetical department would proceed with rigorous consistency to teach all its courses from a historical point of view and end up being a department parallel or subsidiary to the regular department of history. The word "subsidiary" more accurately characterises what it likely to happen here, for any bona fide department of history is prone to regard a department of literary history with a measure of contempt and to treat it accordingly. Serious students seeking historical knowledge are almost certain to take the regular history courses first and courses in literary history second; thus English, under such an arrangement, would become the refuge for those finding the offerings on the main track too demanding for their tastes, and inevitably the number and quality of English majors would decline. Pride, of course, might well sustain the faculty of such a department indefinitely, but even in/a/proud department the list of offerings would be doomed to grow more formal and more sterile with each passing year. The period courses would settle down to presentation of what is sometimes called "cultural history"--chronological reviews of events supplemented by illustrative texts (usually read only in part) and punctuated by regular infusions of audio-visual stimulation. Courses in the major authors would become courses in biography; students in these would spend much time debating such matters as the occasion for Shakespeare's sonnets and the reflections of Wordsworth's relations with his various womenfolk in The Prelude. Courses in literary types under such a system would probably turn into studies in the evolution

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of those types--the sonnet, the novel, or the one-act play--and students taking such courses, though they might acquire a fair notion of the type itself, would retain little more than a hazy notion of individual literary works. Eventually the university administration would have to take notice of the lack of enthusiasm in the ranks of such a department and of its dwindling constituency, and at that point the English faculty might well decide that fragmentation is indeed the lesser of two evils.

The choice is probably, as we used to say, six to one and half a dozen to the other; for mortality will be the consequence in either case. And death by fragmentation must come when our center, regardless of what that center is, fails to hold and instructors, having almost complete freedom to develop their courses, lose sight of their primary responsibility and proceed to indulge special preferences or whims. Among the more fortunate consequences of the process of frangmentation that must automatically follow such a relaxation will be the emergence of courses like women's literature, black literature, and film. Undoubtedly these courses have their place, but we use them all too often, I fear, as side shows that support the more "respectable" offerings in the main tent; and if these turn out to be successful, we add courses in science fiction, the literature of sport, and pornography. The temper of the time being what it is, we may be tempted next to liberalize our major requirements so that students can build all their "relevant but unrelated" courses into degree programs without having to sacrifice precious leisure time in order to take them as electives. At that

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point we shall have pretty well fragmented our main offerings also. The course in modern novel will now present a psychological approach, the Shakespeare course will be little more than a history of the Elizabethan stage, and the Spenser course will have become pure Ficino. Some of us may regard a situation like this as normal and even desirable; and, in fact, a department of English that publicly proclaims its willingness to tolerate a wide variety of approaches to a study of literature is still likely to receive general approval for its escape from conservatism. Toleration of this kind, however, can be salutary only if the department knows and repeatedly makes manifest, to beholders without and within, the center that makes the study of literature a discipline.

The regrettable truth is that the study of literature in academia has never had adequate theoretical underpinning, and it had held a position of importance in liberal education for a variety of reasons most of which have little to do with reality. We who are the beneficiaries of this state of affairs have taken our importance for granted, but it has been possible to do that only so long as higher education has remained elitist in clientele, attracted students more or less habituated to sophisticated literary documents, and served a society inclined to treat great art, music, and literature with deference and ask no questions.

Times have changed. Our security of more than a century has vanished, and we are daily being called upon to justify our existence. The spectable of a discipline without adequate means of self-definition

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engenders distrust and even contempt. Students rightly suspect that we cater to their immature and tasteless preferences, that we reduce the requirements for our degree programs mainly because we ourselves are certain only about what we like, not about what is essential, and that we live in a private world in which the image of order has long since been discarded and in which the only discernible authority is the individual reader. Among the members of our profession, the order of the day, it is painfully clear to outsiders, is everyone for himself.

This is where fragmentation has brought us--or rather, where the causes of our tendency to fragment-have brought us. It may be that the study of literature in English will soon go the way of the study of classical literature, which could at least point to the prohibitive cost of teaching the classical languages in an age of mass education. We who teach literature in our mother tongue have no such easy excuse. We know in our bones that Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dryden, Pope, and Matthew Arnold are relevant, but that kind of knowledge is not enough. We need to be able to explain to ourselves and to others what it is in the works of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dryden, Pope, and Matthew Arnold that makes the differences among them insignificant and renders them all eternally relevant to human life and activity. Knowledge of this kind is the only thing that will end fragmentation and ensure a continuation of the benefits of the poetic imagination to human society. To acquire such saving knowledge and make it prevail is our primary responsibility.